

Shinto the National Religion of Japan.

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Among the very old religions of the world, there are few which are still, to-day, living forces and Shinto is one of them. I call "very old" religions, those of which it is impossible to fix the foundation in the historical period.

It is still more difficult to find, now-a days, one of these religions without a beginning, so to say, to play a part in the life of a great modern industrialized nation. And Shinto plays such a part in Japan. It is, therefore, interesting to study Shinto not merely from a scholarly point of view, but from the simple angle of vision of an average man who reads his newspaper every day, but who thinks, after reading.

Shinto, from two words that mean "The way of the Gods," has a few features in common with another religious system which has been since times immemorial, and which is still, alive force in Asia : Hinduism.

Like Hinduism, it has no founder. It has not grown around the personality of any particular Incarnation or Prophet, not under the impulse given by any particular inspired Scripture, handed from Heaven to Earth at a certain time. Its marvellous geneologies take us back long long before the date ascribed by scholars to Jimmutenno, the first historical Emperor of Japan. No body has taught the Japanese, its symbolism and its rites. Like Hinduism, it has no dogmas. One can have any religious philosophy he pleases, and be a follower of Shinto. There is nothing in it which can justify the name of "religion", in the sense of European Christianity. It could be compared, at the most, with the ancient European national religions,—Greek, Germanic, Celtic etc, which flourished before Christianity.

Like them, like Hinduism and like every old religion, whether it has perished or survived, Shinto was primitively and is still a cult of Nature under its most dutiful and beneficent manifestations.

Among the well-known deities of Shinto are the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Omi-Kami, and her brother, the impetuous Susa-no-wo who incarnates the beauty and horror of the tempest as well as what

one would call, in terms of European mythology, the "Dionysian impulse," both in nature and in them.

These Gods and Goddesses are the objects of marvellous stories related in the first part of the Nihongi, the official Annals of Japan published by imperial order in 729 A.D., and in the Kojiki, published a few years before. The phantastic character of many of their adventures, is by no means less than that of the Hindu "Puras". They transport us into a world where the most unexpected things are possible. But just as in other very old religions, there is, under all these fancies, a poetical symbolisation of the eternal natural laws; and there is also, probably what is more, a hidden science that those who understand the esoteric language can explain.

Another character of this religion, which it shares with the other old ones to which we referred, and with Hinduism, is its suppleness, its capacity of assimilating new elements without losing anything of its proper features. When Buddhism was most powerful in Japan, and when Shinto had to compromise with it by taking the form of "Ryobu-Shinto", then the priests associated the Hindu god Varuna and the local diety of Sumigoshi, near Osaka. They thus revealed a new Sea God, now known as Sin-Tengo. Instances could be multiplied and not only local gods, and gods of a foreign origin, but also men and women remarkable for their great deeds, or for their marvellous or pathetic destiny, have from time to time found a place among the eighty millions of Japanese "Kamis". Such is the case of the celebrated Empress Jingo, who led the first expedition against Korea, about 200 A.D. and who is regarded as one of the Kamis of the Sea. There is no reason for this process of deification to come to an end. Shinto is not a religious system which is still complete once for ever. It is a flowing current of living inspiration, and therefore is susceptible of addition as well as of evolution; and it has, in fact, been undergoing many changes since the by-gone days. But the very sketch of its own evolution will show that, from the beginning, it has always followed the same main lines and will throw light upon its main distinctive feature which is to be, before anything else and more than anything else, a purely national religion.

This feature separates definitely Shinto from the wide-spread world religions, such as Christianity and Islam, as well as from

Hinduism. The world-religions would be better called "democratical" religions, in the sense that they are founded upon the belief in the "equal right of all mankind to share the salvation they offer through faith in a certain revealed truth." Any body can become a true Christian or a true Muslim and, taken in their essence, both Christianity and Islam are forces destructive of nationality, like most of the democratical world forces.

No doubt, Shinto is a religion of Nature. The prominent place occupied in it by *Amaterasu Omi-Kami* the Sun Goddess, would be sufficient to prove this point. But, like all very old religions, "the cult of nature", in Shinto, means, the cult of the Motherland in all her beauty namely, here, the cult of Japan.

In Japan, Nature is really loved and venerated, and is given in national as well as in individual life, a greater place than art. Art itself is understood as something to be entirely in harmony with the natural surroundings, and not to attract attention at their expense. This conception is due, to a great extent, to the influence of Shinto.

A Shinto temple is not a showy building: It is simple and discreet. The beauty of it lies in the thick trees that hide it from a distance; in the landscape one discovers suddenly, from the top of its steps, the marvellous back-ground of dark green mountains that one can admire from its monumental portico, before reaching it. Every body knows the devotion of the Japanese for the Mount Fuji Yama, the residence of the diety *Sengen Sama*, and the highest mountain in Japan. Numerous are the pilgrims who, every year, ascend the Fuji, and, with the greatest respect, salute from the top of it, the Rising Sun. But the Fuji, though the most celebrated, is not only sacred mountain: the Mount Outake, in the province of Shinano, the Mount Mantaj, near the Lake of Chuzenji, the volcano Aso, in the province of Hiso, name also their deities, and their pilgrims. Nearly every place, well-known for the beauty of the Rising or the Setting Sun, is a sacred place. Such instances, however, are common and one could find any amount of them outside Japan. In Shinto, there is still more than the cult of Japan's natural beauty; there is the belief, illustrated by well-known stories, that Japan is actually divine, both by its very soil, by its ruling dynasty and by its people, that it is not a country like any other.

Nothing is more sacred to a Japanese, than his Emperor. For many countries "Shikkens" (regents) and "Shoguns" (ministers) have

practically governed Japan in the place of the Emperors themselves. But the person of an Emperor, son of Amaterasu, possessor of the three symbols of power, the Jewel, the Sword and the Mirror handed by her to Minigi, when he was installed Lord of Japan and living incarnation of Japan itself, with all its past and all its traditions which begins in Heaven, was always inviolable, and regarded with religious devotion. In the days when the Hojo "Shikkens" (Governor-General) were almighty, one of the Emperors, Go-Toba, manifested his will not only to exist as a symbol, but to use his power and govern from the Court of Kyoto, and therefore, come into a clash with Yasutoki, the regent of Kamakura, at that time. An army, commanded by Yasutoki, son of the Regent was sent against Kyoto. Before his departure, Yasutoki asked his father what he would have to do in the case the Emperor would be himself at the head of his army. The answer of Yasutoki is full of significance: "If it is not the Emperor who commands, then fight until you die. But if it is His Majesty, then, throw off your armour and cut the string of your bow. One should not resist an Emperor". The result of this spirit, pure expression of the traditions of Shinto, upon the Japanese soul, is that the long series of the Japanese Emperors from Jimmu Tenno up to now-a-days, present the sole instance in the world of an unbroken dynasty, as old as the country which it is ruling. The first article of the Japanese constitution of 1889 says: "The Empire of a Japan will be ruled by Emperors of that dynasty which has reigned, without interruption throughout all the past centuries".

The history of the development of Shinto, is the history of a long evolution, parallel to that of Japan itself. For the sake of conveniences, it can be divided into four periods:—

- (1) Ancient Shinto, as it was before the 6th century A. D., when Buddhism was introduced in Japan.
- (2) The "Ryobu-Shinto", a sort of compromise between the two religions, which begins during the 8th century and lasts a long time.
- (3) The Revival of pure Shinto during the 18th century.
- (4) Modern official Shinto.

It is more than probable that Shinto has not remained static during these long centuries. Ancient Shinto, as it is known to us, is the result of innumerable local traditions, slowly put together and moulded into a consistent whole. As we have said it is something

essentially simple, containing as much beauty as it could get from the daily contact of an artistic race with natural manifestations alternately charming or terrible, with trees full of flowers, on the one hand, and with frequent typhoons and earthquakes on the other ; it contains also, as much truths as the fresh intuitive power of that race could grasp, during those far gone days. It is then a national religion, in the sense that every primitive religion is. Cult and government are expressed by the word *Matsuriyoto*, meaning "a solemn thing", and the Emperors from the beginning, is considered as the highest Priests, though several classes of priests existed already in those days. At the great sanctuary of Ise, where the three symbols were kept, the divine ancestor of the Emperors was worshipped, and seven times a year the Imperial envoys would go there. When some great danger threatened the nation, petitions were sent there to the Deity.

Buddhism, already much altered since the missionaries of Asoke had preached it as far as they could, reached Japan, through Korea, during the reign of the Emperor Kimmei, in the middle of the 6th century A. D. But it only became popular a few years later, under the government of the saintly Shotoku Taishi, prince imperial and regent during the reign of Empress Suiko. Shotoku Taishi died in 621 A. D. and the success of Buddhism was greatly due to him.

It is not here the place to retrace the history of Buddhism in Japan. One thing is important that it never got into conflicts with Shinto ; but Shinto had to compromise with it and actually did so.

From the 8th to the 18th century flourished in Japan, what is known as "Ryobu-Shinto" or Shinto under a double aspect ; this doctrine, which has itself undergone an evolution, throughout that long period, is the result of the compromise.

Ryobu Shinto could easily last a long time for there could be no philosophical conflict between the two religions that it combined. Ryobu Shinto is pure Shinto, plus Hindu metaphysics imported through Buddhism. No doctrinal problem could arise in the midst of it, for there is no contradiction between Hindu metaphysics, (or any kind of metaphysics) and no metaphysics at all.

Ryobu Shinto flourished until a reaction of another type came, during the 18th century. This reaction is not an isolated phenomenon. It is closely connected with the entirely new atmosphere which penetrates Japan during the rule of the last Tokugawa Shoguns. Many

have put stress upon the interest in modern sciences, that arises in Japan at that time, preparing the future industrialization of the country and its expansion during the Meiji era. But along with this curiosity for foreign technique, there was, however strange it may seem, a hankering after the oldest traditions of Japanese government, of Japanese literature, or Japanese religion and life.

The renaissance of pure Shinto goes side by side with the movement in favour of the restoration of the Emperor's effective power, and with the literary movement *Wagakushu* in favour of a style of writing devoid of Chinese influence. No doubt, also, that these two movements were strongly influenced by the renaissance of pure Shinto.

This reaction, aiming to get rid of Chinese influence in religion as well as in life, brings the people back to the simplicity and virtues of ancient days, and had several great supporters among whom the most celebrated one is *Motoori Norinaga* (1730-1801).

Revived Shinto, and modern Shinto, which is the present stage of its evolution is based upon a conscious ideology, upon what one can call a theory and that theory was well expressed during 19th century by *Hirata Atsutane* (1776-1843), a supporter of a *Wagakushu* movements, and a disciple of *Motoori Norinaga*, who, just as his master used to assert not only the divine right of the Emperors to actually govern, but also the divine origin of the Japanese people and their superiority in courage and intelligence over all the peoples of the world. Just as before, men of great deeds are venerated as Gods. But there is no deed greater, to the eyes of a Japanese, than to die for one's Emperor and country in the battle field. In the midst of busy, noisy Europeanized modern Tokyo, there is a park where a little temple can be seen. It is consecrated to those who have died for Japan during the last wars, and who have become "Kamis." Once in a year, with great solemnity, the Emperor himself, the living God of Japan, son of the Rising Sun, comes and worships them.

Loyalty to the throne, a great virtue of Shinto, has by no means diminished since the "modernization" of the country. It is the national virtue of Japan, and it expresses itself as it does nowhere else. In 1912, when His Majesty *Matsuhito* (Meiji tenno) died the general Maresuki Nogi, famous in the Russo-Japanese war, and his wife, quietly put an end to their lives by the traditionnal rite of *seppuku*. And in 1926, after the death of the Emperor *Yoshihito* (Taisho), the baron

Takeda acted in the same way. They kept up in their own way and of their own free will, the old tradition of "junshi", according to which, when a master died, his faithful servants had to die too, to continue serving him beyond death.

One can say that modern Shinto, essentially with a political and moral attitude, is centered around nationalism, and a national ritual. It never was anything else. However, its evolution is a fact. Its evolution lies in a greater *consciousness* of its value as a national force, in more and more stress put upon its national significance. As a simple primitive religion it had no metaphysical back-ground. Nor has it any now. But a national philosophy, a sort of racism,—based upon the belief in the superiority of the Japanese people and the sacredness of the Japanese Emperor, has, with more force, as centuries passed by, become its philosophy. Many have said that it has no moral teaching. It is not strictly correct. In old Shinto,—like in all very old religions,—a "sin" was a ritual mistake, before anything else ; but, with time, a national code of morals, with loyalty, self-sacrifice to the country, courage etc. as its main virtues, took its place next to the racist philosophy of Shinto. That moral ideal one have already put down in a few words ; it consists of being a true Japanese.

It is a beautiful thing to see that, inspite of its intense mechanization during the last seventy years, Japan has kept its rites and customs. One cannot but be impressed while reading the description of the funeral of the late Emperor Yoshihito (Taisho), hardly more than ten years ago, with all the archaic ceremonial of Shinto, with the funeral chariot, dragged by five oxen, chosen for their special colours and built in such a way that its wheels in turning around, would give out seven different melancholic sounds.

One cannot but admire the survival of the Shinto rites of old, in honour of the very same Gods, and in the very simple wooden temples, hidden amongst thick shady trees and white cryptomeria flowers.

But something is more remarkable still ; it is the official consecration of the old rites, and the living presence of the old spirit, not merely among the masses, but among the "intelligentsia" of Japan, in touch with the modern world.

Shinto managed to survive inspite of the enormous prestige of Buddhism, by mingling itself for a time with the Indian creed, by accepting and transforming its pantheon, and slowly altering its spirit ; for who

can say that a Japanese Buddhist of today, even if he does not frequent the Buddhist and Shintoist temples, is not as penetrated as anybody can be with the Shintoist outlook ? It has, behind it, a long tradition of priesthood, of popular beliefs, of immemorial rites. And that is necessary to make a religion. Its racist philosophy, however purely political it may seem, is entangled with all these things. It has, slowly and unconsciously, grown out of them. It has then become conscious, as a force of reaction, as an impetus of national self-defence, and has recognized them as visible and living symbols of its existence, nay, as the material objects "in which it resided", similar to a divine entity. They were neither created nor recreated by it. That seems to be the strength of Shinto on the basis of a certain narrow definition of the word ; one may deny it the name of "religion", considering especially modern Shinto and call it a mere political philosophy. It is anyhow a very simple philosophy, having all the advantages of a popular religion, and perhaps some other too.

For, after all, love is the great force amongst human beings—not metaphysics ; and ritualistic nationalism, as a cult of a country's ruler, and as a cult of nature worshipped through the beauty of a particular country, is far from ignoring love. Otherwise, accomplishing an archaic rite of superhuman loyalty, how could now-a-days men have wilfully died, just because their contemporary Emperor of the unbroken Solar Dynasty had passed away ?

All Men are Brothers

Yomo-no-umi Mina harakara to Omo yo ni
Nado namikaza no Tachi-sawagu ran.

Surely in this world men are brothers all,
One family !
Then why do winds and waves on all the seas
Rage stormily ?

Emperor Meiji
